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Review of A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians

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A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians. By Joan Mark. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988. Illustrations, notes, bibliographies, index. xx + 428 pp. \$35.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

This is the best written biography I have read in many years. A beautifully crafted book, it is

a comprehensive picture and excellent scholarly treatment of a most unpleasant person, a person one can have little sympathy for in today's world. And yet, to the credit of the author, one comes away from this work having a much greater understanding of Alice Fletcher and a more balanced view of the meaning of her work.

Alice Fletcher became one of the founders of anthropology not through advanced schooling but through fieldwork, public speaking, and an astute political ability. Fletcher was born in Cuba in 1838. Her adored father, a New York City lawyer who brought his family to Cuba frequently because of his health, died early in her life. Her mother remarried, and there is considerable evidence, albeit indirect, that Alice Fletcher was the victim of sexual abuse from her stepfather. No records exist from the hands of Alice Fletcher between the time she was twelve until she became thirty-four. She personally destroyed them. Thus, Joan Mark reconstructed Alice Fletcher's life from others, and Mark does a careful, sensitive job.

From her childhood, Alice Fletcher gained at least two traits that would allow her to pursue a career at a time when many women were denied this avenue. Fletcher was a loner who did not seek help for her own problems but tried to work them out. She maintained her distance from the social elite of New York and the women's movement of the late nineteenth century, including the Association for the Advancement of Women. She was also a person who disliked compromise. Once she came to a conclusion, she fought to see it through. This made her a persistent advocate for those things she sought.

Fletcher's association with the AAW and other women encouraged her to pursue the public lecture circuit when a series of financial disasters befell her. She found that lectures on moundbuilders and Native Americans were extremely well received, and in developing a number of them, she received much encouragement from the youthful director of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Frederic W. Putnam. This association with the Peabody Museum would serve her well throughout her career.

Alice Fletcher began her long association with the La Flesche family and the Omaha Indians in 1881 when she met Susette La Flesche, an Omaha, and Henry Tibbles, a Nebraska journalist and future husband of La Flesche, at the Peabody Museum. At the same time, Fletcher became an ardent advocate of severalty, the division of Native American reservations into individual homesteads. Fletcher went to the Omaha Reservation and others to carve them up and disperse the largess. She lobbied Congress to pass the Dawes Severalty Act. Perhaps no other person worked harder to have Indian lands subdivided, but once Fletcher was able to see the results, she had some second thoughts. After all, this was a time, from 1887 to 1934, when Native Americans lost more land than at any other period in their history.

Fletcher also worked very hard to record many of the religious and cultural practices of Native Americans she came to know. Here the La Flesche family, especially Susette's brother Francis, was particularly helpful as Fletcher's written accounts of many Omaha traditions advanced her career considerably. The recordings caused significant political ramifications within Omaha society, but this did not trouble Fletcher. She was an anthropologist in the heady days when cultural sensitivity was not a part of the ethics of this new profession. Alice Fletcher died in 1923 having witnessed the birth of anthropology and having received many honors. Leaders of the past women's movement and Indian assimilationists mourned her passing.

This excellent book, the first comprehensive biography of Alice Fletcher, fills in many gaps in the history of anthropology as well as the circumstances surrounding the passage and implementation of the Dawes Severalty Act. The work will stand alone as a monument to Alice Fletcher, that Victorian of the Great Plains and many other portions of Indian America, who did so much to so many.

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